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ABSTRACT

A workshop on Literacy and the Right to Know discussed the problems of illiteracy on the job, especially in the context of teaching workers about job hazards. Participants approached the topic from a number of angles: the dimensions of the problem of literacy in workplaces; the impact of Right-to-Know legislation; the role of training and evaluation in the Right-to-Know legislation, and various alternatives to compensate for a lack of language skills. The workshop featured an open panel discussion that included presentations by Gord Nore, Training Manager for Learning in the Workplace at Frontier College; John Woodcroft, Supervisor of Operating Services at the Lake Erie Works of Stelco Steel; Peter Doering, Business Representative for the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America; and Doug Felice, Regional Representative of the Workers' Health and Safety Centre. Participants agreed that, although illiteracy and language difficulties are problems in Canadian workplaces, they are attributable as much to a changing world as to any other cause. The great loss in worker potential due to illiteracy and language difficulty was another area of agreement. Participants also agreed that certain segments of the population--for example, Native Americans and new immigrants--have special needs, and that certain literacy tests are unfair to such people because of the cultural biases they contain. Much discussion focused on the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, because of which thousands of workers are being subjected to training for the first time in their working lives and many find it a very uncomfortable experience. The workshop also contained reports from four groups: management (Doug Maurich); professionals (Judy Ann Roy); labor (Peter Doering); and government (Lillian Vine). (A list of workshop participants and their affiliations is included.) (KC)

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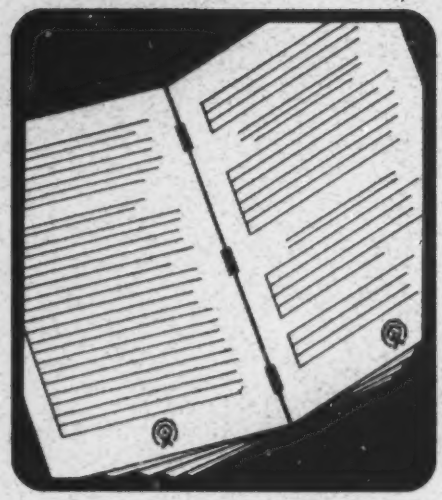

LITERACY AND THE RIGHT TO KNOW

A Workshop

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LITERACY AND THE RIGHT TO KNOW

A Workshop

Hamilton, Ontario
April 18 and 19, 1989

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety

LITERACY AND THE RIGHT TO KNOW

A WORKSHOP

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Canadian Centre
for Occupational Health and Safety
A Workshop

LITERACY AND THE RIGHT TO KNOW

Tuesday, April 18 and Wednesday, April 19, 1989
Hamilton Convention Centre, Hamilton, Ontario

Tuesday, April 18, 1989

8:15 am REGISTRATION AND COFFEE - Foyer

9:00 am **Welcome and Introduction to the Workshop - Webster C**
Lillian Vine, Manager, Committees & Workshops
Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety

9:15 am **Panel Discussion**

Maureen Shaw, Chairman
Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Council

Gord Nore, Training Manager for Learning in the Workplace, Frontier College

John Woodcroft, Supervisor, Operating Services
Lake Erie Works, Stelco

Peter Doering, Representative
United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners of America

Doug Felice, Regional Representative
Workers' Health and Safety Centre

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

10:30 am **BREAK - Foyer**

10:45 am **Workshop #1 - Problems**

(a) **What is the role of literacy in the workplace?**
(b) **Are there problems? What are they? How are they exhibited?**
(c) **How deep are the concerns? of workers? of management?**
(d) **How do the problems relate to accidents?**
(e) **How does the level of literacy relate to the risk of the job?**

11:30 am **Workshop #2 - Current Efforts**

(a) What efforts are being made? Where do they focus?
(b) What seems to be working? What does not? Why?
(c) Where should efforts be focused?

12:30 pm LUNCH - Albion A

1:30 pm **Workshop #3 - Right to Know**

(a) What are the objectives of right-to-know legislation? How far do they promise a right to understand?
(b) Can they be fulfilled? How?
(c) Do they depend on language skills? Which?
(d) Does lack of language skills negate the protection of right-to-know?
(e) How do you provide the benefits of right to know to those who may lack language skills?

2:30 pm **Workshop #4 - Training and Evaluation**

(a) Discuss the role of training in right to know and safe work.
(b) How far can training go toward a safe workplace?
(c) What and how do you evaluate?
(i) people - pre-employment? in the workplace? after training?
(ii) materials?
(d) Can evaluation of people lead to discrimination?
(e) How do you evaluate training materials an information?
(f) How do you choose appropriate training programs?

3:45 pm **BREAK - Foyer**

4:00 pm **Workshop #5 - Alternatives**

(a) Discuss the role and interrelation of various training means in making the workplace safe.
(b) How well do they work?
(c) Discuss coping skills to compensate for lack of language skills:
- graphics
- computer aids
- other aids
- "buddy" system
- involvement of others--community resources, educational institutions
(d) Other alternatives.

5:30 pm CASH BAR - Albion A
6:00 pm DINNER - Albion A

Wednesday, April 19, 1989

8:30 am COFFEE - Foyer

9:00 am **Workshop #6 - Homogeneous Groups**

Whose problems? Whose solutions? Whose responsibility?
What solutions?
Preparation of report

10:30 am BREAK - Foyer

10:45 am **Plenary Session - Webster C**

Reports of Labour, Management, Professionals and Government
Recommendations from the Workshop

12 noon **Close of Workshop**

CM POINTS
CCOHS has applied to the American Board of Industrial Hygiene to have this workshop accredited for CIH Credit Maintenance (CM) Points.

SUMMARY

Current strategies in occupational health and safety depend more and more on the Right to Know. But what if illiteracy or language problems render a worker incapable of taking in information about job hazards?

This CCOHS workshop on "Literacy and the Right To Know" held in Hamilton, Ontario, on April 18 and 19, 1989, wrestled with this and other related questions.

Participants approached the topic from a number of angles: the dimensions of the problem of literacy in workplaces; the impact of Right-To-Know legislation; the role of training and evaluation in the Right To Know; and various alternatives to compensate for a lack of language skills.

The workshop featured an open panel discussion which included presentations from Gord Nore, Training Manager for Learning in the Workplace at Frontier College; John Woodcroft, Supervisor of Operating Services at the Lake Erie Works of Stelco Steel; Peter Doering, Business Representative for the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America; and Doug Felice, Regional Representative of the Workers' Health and Safety Centre.

Participants achieved agreement on many points and uncovered much common ground. There was general agreement that while illiteracy and language difficulties are problems in Canadian workplaces, they are attributable as much to a changing world as to any other cause.

"Illiteracy is the inability to receive and transmit information in a changing world" was one definition offered. Several participants noted the transformation in Canada from an industrial-based economy to an information-based economy. This, they said, put a premium on literacy in the workplace.

The great loss in worker potential due to illiteracy and language difficulty was another area of agreement. "So many people who have a lot to give cannot because of these handicaps," said one participant. "We must find ways to get information to them."

Participants also agreed that certain segments of the population--for example, Native People and new immigrants--have special needs. Certain literacy tests are unfair to such people because of the cultural biases they contain, a participant noted.

Much discussion focussed on the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS). "The whole problem of literacy is very much related to WHMIS training," one participant said. He noted that with WHMIS, thousands of workers are being subjected to training for the first time in their working lives and many find it a very uncomfortable experience.

Others noted that embarrassment makes workers reluctant to admit to any inability to receive and transmit information. This makes it difficult to help them.

The issue of literacy tests and literacy screening in job recruitment sparked considerable debate. Some felt that such tests were necessary, especially at a time when there is such an emphasis on the Right To Know. They also spoke of the possibilities of liability if a worker, through an inability to understand safety instructions, were injured or caused injury to a fellow worker or others.

All agreed that if tests had to be used, they should be appropriate and relevant to the job and be free of cultural, ethnic and other biases. OHS training materials should also be free of such biases, they said.

INTRODUCTION

Lillian Vine

Welcome to the CCOHS workshop on Literacy and the Right to Know. It is very nice that in this small, interested group there are some "repeaters." In the school system, it is bad to be a repeater but at CCOHS workshops, it is great; we are delighted to see people participate in one workshop after another.

The process of workshops at CCOHS was started as a decision of our Council of Governors, our governing body representing government, labour and management from across Canada. The Governors saw in the CCOHS statute a means to facilitate broad discussions on issues important to reach the goal of healthy and safe workplaces. Information is the principal work of CCOHS. Information is important in improving conditions in the workplace; the doubling of the demand for information from us each year shows that people want to know. The Council saw that the information would be enhanced by discussion and consensus which could lead to progress in occupational health and safety. And we have found from our experience of over a dozen workshops that they were right. Participants feel very strongly that the agreements that they have reached and the conclusions that they have communicated have had an effect; they feel a strong sense of ownership--we, the staff, help to make it happen by providing a forum and a framework. On behalf of the Council and our President and Chief Executive Officer, Gordon Atherley, I would like to welcome you. I am Lillian Vine, Manager, Committees and Workshops for the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety.

This particular workshop came into being through the requests of two people who were seeing serious problems with an important right--the right to know; it was a right workers wanted, to protect them in the workplace. But this right to know has led to some serious problems and our requesters wanted to discuss these problems and find, if not solutions, at least some areas of agreement. One of them is Peter Doering and I am delighted he can be here today.

The other is Maureen Shaw, who spoke with us last December about the possibility of holding such a workshop. As Chairman of the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Council, an advisory council to the Minister, she is interested because she has seen many problems in the workplace; but beyond that she also has a long-standing personal interest in the subject of literacy. She has a child who is learning disabled and she has been very active in organizations that deal with such problems. She had planned to be here and was really looking forward to it. But it is taking some time for things to get back on track after the Alberta election, and she was just not able to get approval to travel. She tried everything, but without success. She wishes she could be here, her interest is here, and her best wishes are with you as you begin this important discussion.

PANEL DISCUSSION

* Gord Nore, Frontier College

* John Woodcroft, Stelco Steel

* Peter Doering, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America

* Doug Felice, Workers' Health and Safety Centre

PANEL PRESENTATIONS

Lillian Vine

Our first speaker is Gord Nore. He is the Training Manager for the Learning in the Workplace Project at Frontier College in Toronto. Frontier College has done a great deal of innovative programming to help people learn to read. Gord is responsible for all training and materials development for the project. This includes developing strategies and materials to train individuals within companies to operate their own in-house learning projects.

He has taught English as a Second Language, academic upgrading, business writing at George Brown, Seneca and Humber Colleges, and at the York University English Language Institute and the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto. He sits on the Editorial Board of Starting Out, a newspaper for adult new readers in Ontario and has consulted to organizations wishing to establish literacy projects.

Gord Nore - Frontier College

I want to speak about Frontier College programs and how we have been responding to people's literacy needs for the past 90 years. We are Canada's oldest adult learning centre. We were founded in 1899 as the Canadian Reading Camp Association and we have been bringing literacy education to people whenever and wherever they happen to be, regardless of their circumstances. We often joke that our campus is Canada. We run programs for homeless street people (Beat the Street program), programs for people in prisons, programs for people coming out of prisons, programs for people with physical and mental handicaps, and Learning in the Workplace, our most recent entry.

Frontier College was founded in 1899 by Alfred Fitzpatrick, a Presbyterian missionary from Pictou County, Nova Scotia, who was working in remote mining, rail and lumber camps in the old Canadian frontier. He wanted to do something about the incredible poverty in which people lived. He felt that education was the key to breaking the cycle of poverty among Canada's labour force in the remote communities, so he recruited university students. For a number of years, he sent about 200 university students to work at regular jobs during the day in mining or rail or lumber or in settlement camps. In the evening and on the weekends they would tutor their co-workers in reading and writing. This gave rise to probably the first citizenship program available in Canada. In 1919, Fitzpatrick penned the Handbook for New Canadians which is arguably the first book on English as a second language and citizenship in this country.

Fitzpatrick had another notion--he felt that if there were ways of bringing secondary education to workers, why not post-secondary education? In his book, The University in Overalls, he outlined a blueprint to bring university education to the remote work camps. This was done through an elaborate correspondence network, where people working in remote areas could obtain university degrees through Frontier College.

Frontier College also brought technology and learning into remote camps long before anyone else thought of it. Fitzpatrick was very interested in different ways of bringing about learning--not just through books, but through the use of celluloid films and radio.

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Part of the tradition of Frontier is that everyone is welcome and that everyone can learn. Classes were often set up in boxcars, tents or log cabins. Dr Norman Bethune was a labourer/teacher for Frontier College in 1913 in Alberta.

Edmund Bradwin succeeded Fitzpatrick in the 1930s. Bradwin had been a labourer teacher with the College since 1904 and was responsible for creating many of the original camp schools across the frontier. In fact, for a period of 10 years, he was engaged almost entirely in building log cabins that would serve as reading rooms. We still send out labourer/teachers to remote areas, but the demand is not as great. We have found that the frontier people live in the cities now. In fact, 70% of non-readers live in cities and are Canadian-born.

For some years, we have been trying to get a workplace project going in the cities. There was not a great deal of interest--many employers could not accept the idea that some of their workers had trouble reading and writing. Many unions, mindful of this, did not want to put their membership at risk. So, there was no climate for workers to come forward and say they had needs around reading and writing. However, with some of the changes that we have been observing recently, we know this is no longer the case. The Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) is an example of a contemporary worksite literacy need. Right now, WHMIS training materials are written at a minimum grade twelve reading level. We have been going into companies to help set up peer tutoring programs. We have received funding from Employment and Immigration Canada to do five companies in two Canadian provinces over the next three years. We interview employees, we interview shop stewards, we talk to health and safety committees, we talk to senior management, we talk to unions, and we walk around the company and ask people what they would like to learn. We then recruit peer tutors from the company to work with their co-workers on reading, writing and math using the immediate materials in the company. For example, we are now developing some activities around WHMIS material to help people develop their reading and writing skills.

Peer tutoring is one way of getting at the problem. But not everyone wants a tutor, not everyone is comfortable with that kind of environment, so we are looking at other ways of helping people in the workplace. One of these is consulting to existing training opportunities. Say a trainer is doing health and safety or teaching people how to read blueprints. We will work with the trainer to help him/her make the presentation more effective to people who have trouble with reading and writing.

We are also concerned with plain language--it is fine to teach people how to read, but if the material is too difficult, we have to work at the opposite end. We are gearing up to train companies to make their documents more effective and easier to use so that people on the shop floor can understand them.

I would like to say a final few words about the notion of literacy. When we talk about millions of Canadians who are functionally illiterate, we are not talking about people who cannot write their names or who cannot read or write anything at all. We are talking about the ability to receive and transmit and work with information in a changing world. One of the obvious solutions to this is teaching people how to read--but remember that the issue is information. Recently, Frontier College was involved in a joint project with the Ontario Public Health Association called "Literacy and Health." We looked at some of the things that were happening to people who were not getting the most effective

use out of health services and health information. We concluded that we cannot reasonably say this is simply because they cannot read and write--there are other factors involved. People's lives are not placed at risk because they cannot read and write; they are placed at risk because they do not have access to information. We need to do several things. At one extreme, we need to help people learn how to read and write; we need to make the information more useful, more readable. There is a middle ground called accessibility. To create access to information, we need a more open community where learning is valued. I believe that, right now, learning is not valued. People see training as something threatening, something that could potentially cost jobs. We are going to have to make a transition from a training or schooling society to a learning society where everybody sees value in the process of teaching and learning.

Lillian Vine

John Woodcroft was born in Hamilton and resides in Simcoe. He was educated at Ryerson Institute of T hnology and has been employed by Stelco Steel for 31 years. He is the Superintende: of Operating Services at the Lake Erie Works. He is a past president of the Ontario Lung Association.

What is particularly interesting and heartwarming is that John comes to us through a labour contact. She said that if we wanted a really good management person to speak at the workshop, someone who has seen and understands the problems and who wants to do something about them, we should get John Woodcroft. So we did.

John Woodcroft - Stelco Steel

This workshop on Literacy and the Right to Know is very dear to my heart. I represent Stelco Steel in Hamilton, but more specifically the Lake Erie Works, and my comments this morning deal specifically with the Lake Erie Works.

We have a need for ongoing training in the steel industry because we are constantly upgrading the skill levels of our employees, dealing specifically with manual trades, different processes and WHMIS. The basis of my remarks this morning will deal with WHMIS.

Twelve months ago, we realized that with the implementation of WHMIS there was not only a need for the Lake Erie Works as a separate entity to deal with this subject, but that there was also a need for the people at Lake Erie Works to be able to learn. Learning is a real challenge. First, we have to decide what we are going to teach the workers; then, we have to evaluate our success.

As a manager, I have always had concerns about giving information to people. Did they really understand what I gave them? Did they even read it? If I cannot communicate something to a worker and that worker cannot learn, I feel my ability to manage is in jeopardy.

In developing our WHMIS project, the most logical approach was to develop a joint responsibility between labour and management. We knew that having just one set of instructors was insufficient for 1400 employees. We took 12 people--6 labour and 6 salaried people--and developed our own training package for instructors. We used other resources that were available to us and developed the initial package for the generic training under WHMIS. We have yet to develop our second package which deals with specific job training.

During the initial part of the training project, our instructors began to recognize in some of the people they were teaching the inability to understand on the level we expected them to. Unfortunately our instructors were not of the calibre to recognize learning deficiencies, so we had to look outside our organization. Before we did this, I sat down with Peter Leibovitch, the President of Local 8782, United Steelworkers of America, to try to address this issue. Without the input of the total work force, you will have a great deal of trouble dealing with this problem.

Our first step was to look for assistance outside the company. We went to the Workers' Education Centre and asked them to make a presentation to us on their programs for dealing with literacy. Two presentations were made, and I found that I was not completely sold on what we were being told--specifically, how to determine who has a problem. Nonetheless, the members of our joint committee went out and tried to flush out people we thought might have a learning disability. Out of 1400 people, we approached 12 we knew had a problem. These 12 were divided into 2 categories: one English-speaking group who had difficulty with the English language; and the other who have English as a second language.

Now that we had something to work with, we solicited the Workers' Education Centre again. I decided to proceed with a trial program that would be divided into two--one dealing with people who had difficulty with English as a second language and one dealing with people who had a learning disability. We did not distinguish that learning disability as being a lack of education or a physical problem.

We now have a program in place consisting of 15 three-hour sessions which is being run by the Workers' Education Centre. I feel very positive about what we are doing. But there are some disappointments. The people who had a language problem did not come to the course. There are probably a great many reasons, but embarrassment is likely one significant factor. If I had a problem, I probably would not be willing to tell my boss; it might restrict my advancement in the organization or my ability to function in my position.

Our position, at Lake Erie Works, is that if a worker has a problem, we will deal with that problem. If we cannot deal with the problem in the format we are using now, we will use outside resources, whether it is one-on-one community services or whether I seek the assistance of say, Frontier College. We have to deal with the problems. It is essential, in dealing with literacy, to get the most productivity out of your workers. Because of literacy problems, I am not discovering the talents that my employees possess, so I cannot use those talents. Many people in the workplace have a lot to give; we have to educate them so we can free these talents to be used in a productive way on the job.

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At this workshop, we will all be discussing our own unique problems. I can only say that dealing with the problems requires the cooperation of all people in the organization. You will also need the assistance of professionals. There are resource groups available. When we go into our work groups, the most important thing I see is to recognize the problem, put in place a method to deal with the problem and recognize the ongoing need in hiring practices. As time goes on, we will all recognize that the ability to upgrade the skill level of employees will rest heavily on their ability to read, write and understand information.

Lillian Vine

Our next speaker is Peter Doering of the Carpenters' Union Local 1325 in Edmonton. Peter is one of the requesters of this workshop.

Peter arrived in Canada in 1951 in pursuit of a future in farming. Soon it became necessary to support his struggling family farm with outside employment. Eventually, his part time construction job turned into a full-time occupation.

As carpenter supervisor, he took part in the construction of many large and difficult energy projects in remote areas of Alberta and British Columbia. Prolonged periods of unemployment following the drastic decline of the Alberta economy in 1983 gave rise to the idea of self-help programs. Peter became involved in the formation of Tarfield Resources Inc., a worker-owned and operated energy company reflecting the principle of workers' financial participation.

Since Peter's election in July 1988 as Business Representative for the Carpenters' Local 1325, his area of activity revolves around the northern job sites. There he finds the familiar cases of isolation, lack of local opportunities and lack of opportunities for natives and serious problems among the native and ethnic populations.

Peter Doering - United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners of America

On behalf of myself and Local 1325, I want to thank the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety for the invitation to the platform. I am pleased to have this opportunity to relate to you our own down-to-earth problems.

Literacy and the lack of language comprehension in the workplace (and everywhere, for that matter) is a subject dear to my heart. My personal experiences as a new Canadian strengthened me in my resolve to offer my limited ability and my limited resources to help those less fortunate, those disadvantaged and those in remote areas who do not have the same opportunities as we in the cities have.

The recently-enacted WHMIS legislation suddenly uncovered the extent of illiteracy without offering any practical solutions. Without doubt, workers everywhere welcome a safer workplace and welcome the disclosure of information on hazardous materials they encounter in their daily lives and work. But this right to know must not be interpreted by employers as their right to choose among their work force, nor must it lead to hidden discrimination and unjust hardships. In our opinion, WHMIS fails to address this aspect and very strict guidelines should be forthcoming.

Perhaps I can illustrate this point by telling you some of the problems we meet in our somewhat remote area of the country. The jurisdictional territory of Local 1325 stretches from 70 kilometers south of Edmonton east and west to the Saskatchewan and British Columbian borders and north to take in the entire northern half of Alberta, and the Northwest Territories including the district of Mackenzie. My area of activity centres around the industrial sites of Fort McMurray, Fort Saskatchewan and the refinery row in Edmonton. In addition, we have several large pulp mill projects and forestry projects in the planning or early construction stages. During the construction period, we had very little difficulty with learning disabilities or language disabilities, although many of our members are of ethnic background. On a construction site, there is always someone who can interpret or help--we use the "buddy" system. We also find that the construction industry has a universal language so that even though the words may differ, the principles are the same. But as we experience less construction in Alberta, we in the Carpenters' Union have to concentrate more on maintenance in the existing petro-chemical plants. Now our construction workers are suddenly exposed to WHMIS programs and we find that some of our ethnic members do not have sufficient language skills to pass the tests. Because of that, in some of the plants, these people are refused employment. This presents a very serious human problem which I think employers, unions and governments must try to solve.

As WHMIS progresses, we are experiencing a proliferation of information. Obviously, we need this information for our own benefit, but I believe we need a unifying program to train trainers in occupational health and safety under the WHMIS legislation.

I would like to tell you our experiences in the area of native employment. Local 1325 is very anxious to involve the native population in the outlying areas in the work force. Until now, native people were excluded. I am resolved to change this and I am in very close contact with native organizations. They are very anxious to work, but they do not entirely trust our promises. For instance, at one of the plants in Fort McMurray, the safety orientation program is 2-1/2 hours long and is followed by a written test. At another large plant, there is an orientation program of 1-1/2 days' duration. Unfortunately, the material and instruction are highly technical and above the level of knowledge of some native people. When it came time to write the test, they were so totally frustrated they were unable to pass and were refused employment. I believe that with the help of local government, companies should take the responsibility of identifying and addressing the needs of these people to help them upgrade their skills to acceptable standards. One company, to help the candidates get hired, provided some intensive weekend training that enabled some of them to pass the test. This is a bandaid solution only--not a long-term solution--to the workplace literacy problem.

The Prime Minister declared war on illiteracy a year ago and committed $110 million to the cause. We have not been able to find any of this funding; perhaps some of you have. Perhaps occupational health and safety departments across the country should take a closer look at developing a unified program to train under the WHMIS legislation. We need people with practical experience in the training program.

Next year, 1990, has been declared the National Year of Literacy. I believe that if we in Canada want to do more than pay lip service to literacy, we have to make a sincere commitment to help our less privileged fellow citizens. I am speaking on behalf of my less fortunate fellow workers when I ask each and every one of you assembled here today to join together to help win this fight against illiteracy.

Lillian Vine

Our next speaker represents the Workers' Health and Safety Centre. Doug Felice is the provincial field representative with the Workers' Health and Safety Centre in Toronto. He is responsible for working with provincial labour organizations to assist in planning courses, conferences, workshops and training programs to fit their health and safety training needs. Doug has worked with a number of unions to assist with their training needs, including members of the Ontario Nurses Association (ONA), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Canadian Paperworkers' Union (CPU), the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), United Steelworkers of America (USWA) and several building trade unions, to name a few. He has also worked with a number of unions and employers in setting up joint training programs for their joint health and safety committees and their work force.

Before joining the staff of the Workers' Health and Safety Centre in 1986, Doug was coordinator of the NDP Task Force looking into health and safety issues in the province of Ontario, and was Union President of Local 84 of the Canadian Paperworkers' Union in Thorold, Ontario, where he worked for Ontario Paper for 25 years. Doug has been active in the field of health and safety for more than 20 of those years and was the co-chairman of the Joint Health and Safety Committee at Ontario Paper.

Since August 1986, Doug has also served as a labour sidesperson on the Workers' Compensation Appeals Tribunal responsible for the final appeal in the Workers' Compensation System.

Doug Felice - Workers' Health and Safety Centre

I thank CCOHS for the opportunity to address this group. I want to start by giving a short explanation about the Workers' Health and Safety Centre.

The Workers' Health and Safety Centre was started as a pilot project by the Ontario Federation of Labour in 1978 on an initial grant from the Ontario government. At that time, we put together a basic occupational health and safety training program. Since that time we have trained more than 50,000 workers in Ontario through this 30-hour basic occupational health and safety training program. This program, with the exception of the legislative aspects, is used in most of the provinces in this country. Most of the international unions are using parts of it in their training. It has also been translated into four or five different languages and is used in some other countries of the world. It is one of the best values the Ontario government ever got for its grant money.

The training centre has always been funded by the government, either fully or partially. After the initial grant money, it was funded by lottery grant funds. In 1985, the Ontario government made some major changes in the Workers' Compensation Act, including the formation of the tribunal, and a tripartite system called the Workers' Compensation Board Occupational Safety and Health Education Authority. That Authority administers or oversees a budget in excess of $46 million which is where we get our direct funding. So, in fact, we are part of the WCB system. It is a tripartite system and the representatives are from labour (Stu Cooke, past District Director of the Steelworkers' Union), management (John Rideout) and government (this chair is vacant). We have a Board

of Directors that represents six of the largest Ontario Federation of Labour affiliates as well as other organizations such as the Ontario Teachers' Federation, the Ontario Nurses' Association, Provincial Building Trades and Teamsters. This group of labour people represents more than 1,100,000 workers in Ontario. So, it is in fact a very representative group.

What has happened as a result of the right to know becoming law in this province is that it has put a tremendous demand onto our Centre to assist unions and employers to set up training programs. The philosophy of the Workers' Health and Safety Centre is that to provide adequate training in the workplace, the best people to do that training are workers. As a result, for the small employers, we have assisted by providing previously trained instructors for the delivery of the WHMIS training in-house. To do that, the employer and the union and the health and safety committee meet with our instructor for a tour of the operation to get a good understanding of exactly what is happening there. They then sit down with the instructor and work out the company's and the union's training needs for WHMIS.

We have also been training hundreds of in-house instructors to deliver WHMIS training in their own companies. As a result, the question of literacy has come up. The labour movement recognized this quite some time ago as being a potential problem, because for the first time in many people's working lives, they were involved in a direct training program. In many cases, it was the first time the employer had done anything in the way of an educational program with the work force.

Three types of problems have surfaced in Toronto. Many people who are functionally illiterate were not being discovered because there was no need for this type of communication. We have the group of workers born in Canada who are functionally illiterate; we have people who are not native to Canada who have a language problem; and the third group that is surfacing has a problem with literacy within their own (not English or French) language. What has happened as a result of this is that many employers are changing their positions about workers with language problems. Many employers are beginning to test employees, which is something the labour movement opposes--people are generally fearful of tests. As a labour movement, we are somewhat paranoid as to what the employer is going to do with the test results. We are afraid that workers will be terminated because they are unable to understand WHMIS training. A lot of workers are terrified of being involved in this educational process because they are afraid they will not be able to absorb the information and will lose their jobs.

Management and unions must work together to find solutions to this problem. Different unions and employers are dealing with it in different ways. Some are looking at the training program and doing different programs for different segments of their work force.

Another difficulty that is surfacing is that a lot of the WHMIS information is not going to be available in other languages. The Workers' Centre is trying to address this problem by developing training materials in five languages now and looking for funding to expand into other languages. What some employers are looking at is setting up internal structures to deal with that problem by communicating on a one-on-one level on the workshop floor. Instead of putting the pressure on that worker to understand the information, they are putting in place a communication system between the health and safety committee, the supervisors, and the local shop stewards so the worker can go to someone to get the information if s/he has a problem.

The most difficult part of this issue is that, because of very major differences in workplaces, there is no easy or universal solution to the problem. The groups I have been dealing with have sat down with the trade union, recognized the problem and had some very open and meaningful discussion on how to resolve the problem internally. If the problem cannot be resolved internally, they can come to organizations such as the Workers' Health and Safety Centre for assistance. The Ontario Federation of Labour has a Basic English Skills Training System around the province, and the Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto has had an English as a Second Language Program for some time.

But unfortunately, some of the employers who have had their own English Second Language programs in place have said they will be changing their hiring practices because they feel the problem has gone beyond what they are prepared to deal with. This indicates that employers feel uncomfortable with the level of literacy and requirements that they are going to have to make to upgrade their work force to meet their responsibility under the WHMIS requirements. Even the Ministry of Labour is reporting employers asking if they can fire employees who do not understand WHMIS. That was surely never the intention of a workplace "Right to Know."

Lillian Vine

Thank you all very much. I would be remiss and ungrateful if I did not make it absolutely clear to all of you that the people who are on the panel and who graciously thank us for this opportunity to speak are doing so at their own expense. It is a tremendous thing for the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety that people want to do things for us because they have faith in what we do. It is the policy that we pay our panelists neither a fee to speak nor expenses to travel to our workshops. When one panelist was asked why he would spend his own time and money to speak at a CCOHS workshop, he replied that he believed the process was important and that it could lead to progress--and he wanted to be a part of it.

I want to express my own and CCOHS' appreciation to this panel for this contribution.

PLENARY REPORTS FROM HOMOGENEOUS GROUPS:

* MANAGEMENT
* PROFESSIONALS
* LABOUR
* GOVERNMENT

Lillian Vine

The panel presentations and this final plenary session are being taped. We will transcribe the tapes, edit them, and send a draft to the group chairmen and panelists to ensure they reflect exactly what you want them to. They are then printed with a summary and a list of participants into a proceedings. Each participant will receive a copy of the proceedings; you are free to copy them, distribute them, and use them. We have to charge for any copies beyond the one you, as a participant, receive. Charging is something we do not like to do, but it is something we have to do. But there is no charge for copying or reprinting them and you do not have to ask for permission to do so. We would appreciate knowing how many are distributed. We know that there are ripple effects from these workshops because we hear about them long after the workshop is over.

We do not have an evaluation sheet for our workshops because, in many years of attending and organizing workshops, I have not yet found one that I like. But we do want to hear your comments and criticisms and we take them very seriously. If you have compliments, we love to hear them. If there are suggestions or even criticisms, we will certainly act on them. We consider these workshops an important part of the CCOHS program and we want them to be useful to you.

I will now call on the rapporteurs of the homogeneous group discussions to report conclusions and recommendations.

REPORT OF MANAGEMENT

Daniel Maurich - Canada Wire and Cable

Management looked at the various problems of literacy within the workplace and identified two in particular. The first deals with the hiring of new employees and where the responsibilities lie; the second, with existing employees.

There are different requirements and different job needs and different tasks that are performed in various operations. In hiring new employees, we found that we cannot set specific guidelines, rules or requirements for everyone. Different industries have different tasks that require different skills and each individual operation has to establish its own level of requirements for new employees. There was a very strong feeling within the Management group that government has a responsibility to the people who are unemployed and who cannot meet a certain level of literacy or ability to perform within the workplace.

Some people entering the workplace are not new employees, they are contract workers. We feel that responsibility to ensure they have the necessary abilities required for a particular position lies with the group placing these employees. Whether government takes on the responsibility of educating or upgrading individuals or whether there will be a group comprised of labour, management and government taking on that responsibility, there is a strong need for someone to assume it.

The second concern is with workers presently employed within the work force who are functionally illiterate. There are a number of ways that management can cope with this problem. If the requirements for the job demand a certain level or ability, it should be the responsibility of the employer to do whatever is needed to upgrade those employees; it is also the responsibility of the employee to get him/herself to the required level of competency. Management cannot do it alone. In an organized work force, the unions must take an active responsibility to see that their membership is upgraded. We see a tripartite responsibility (government, unions and industry) for upgrading employees.

We identified a number of solutions that are in place right now. The most common is the "buddy" system. If this system is presently working in a company, it should not be disturbed. In-house translators are being used to translate English to another language. There are Employee Assistance Plans for employees who identify their own needs to get some professional counselling. Some companies offer educational assistance programs for employees who want to upgrade communication and math skills as well as other work-related skills or personal self-improvement. Frontier College offers another avenue for employers and management to help their workers. No one solution is the best for everyone; management will have to identify its work force, identify the needs of that work force and then decide on the best method to upgrade employees.

REPORT OF PROFESSIONALS

Judy Ann Roy - New Brunswick Occupational Health & Safety Commission

The Professionals looked at the issue more globally by taking into consideration the panel presentations, the background materials and the workshop discussions.

It seems that the underlying problem is not necessarily the lack of literacy but the change in society that is moving from an industrial base to an information/technology base. With that in mind, we approached the subject by looking at whose problem it is and the types of solutions. The key players are employers, employees, government (including occupational health and safety bodies and social services) and educators.

EMPLOYERS have to comply with the health and safety legislation. They have to teach their workers about the legislation and the hazards in the workplace. They have to meet the challenges of this information-based environment, bearing in mind profitability and competition. Employers realize or should realize that employees are also consumers. If they are not working and earning an income, they cannot consume. So the reduction of non-employables increases the market for employers' products.

There should be emphasis placed on lifestyle skills for the workers' mental and physical health which benefits the employer through less absenteeism, less employee turnover and better working morale. A low literacy level limits an employee's chances for lateral and upward movement within the organization and the amount that employee can contribute to the workplace.

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For the EMPLOYEES, some of the effects described above are the same. Lack of literacy limits an employee's ability to participate and to move within a company, as well as it limits his/her ability to contribute to society. Literacy affects the employee's ability to obtain and maintain a job. Literacy limits the employee's ability to be trained. According to the background literature, current health and safety materials are written at a level above the understanding of most. Literacy limits even an employee's ability to develop or maintain good lifestyle skills.

Unions are important players in this scenario. They are part of the solution in ensuring that their membership gets the appropriate health and safety training. Non-unionized workers and small employers are likely to have special problems that would require different and innovative solutions.

GOVERNMENTS should be more involved in the funding of literacy and second language training. Participation from Ministries responsible for occupational health and safety legislation is vital.

Literacy limits employability of Canadians and thus places strain on welfare and other social services (health, finance and employment departments and agencies). It limits Canada's ability to compete globally as a country. Agencies and departments have a responsibility to ensure that immigrants are or become functionally literate in one of the official languages of Canada. These agencies and departments have to work together to alleviate poverty, and that will help to increase the overall education level of Canadians.

From EDUCATORS, including departments of government that deal with education, colleges, and skills development agencies, there is a need to improve the current education system which right now does not ensure literacy at appropriate levels. Most training materials are aimed at a Grade 12 or higher literacy level. There has been little or no evaluation and identification of how efficient or successful training has been. Another major problem is the lack of a coordinated literacy training effort; they range from community literacy programs to specific workplace training.

Who is responsible for literacy training? We all are.

REPORT OF LABOUR

Peter Doering - Carpenters Local Union 1325

Labour first looked at whose problem illiteracy is. It is first the workers' problem because their livelihood is being threatened. Literacy allows the worker to fully participate in workplace safety programs. The right to know becomes meaningless to a worker who does not have appropriate language and communication skills. An illiterate worker can increase the hazards of the workplace.

The problem also belongs to the employers, because they cannot take full advantage of their most valuable asset--workers. If a worker cannot express him/herself on the job, his/her talents will remain hidden. There is a place for everyone, but it is the responsibility of management to find that place. The employer is responsible for informing all workers of the safety rules and regulations, and for providing training to ensure a safe working environment.

Society has a problem because the lack of language and communication skills hinders the participation of some people in the community and society at large. Not being able to understand the workings of our government undermines the democratic process of Canada.

Where does the responsibility for literacy lie? We feel that society as a whole has a responsibility to ensure that every person living in this country meets a certain standard of literacy.

In looking at solutions, we found that the employer has to gain a better understanding of the problems of illiterate workers and be willing to provide assistance to those workers who are deficient in language and communication skills by providing them paid time off to upgrade.

The government must ensure that literacy programs are not only available but also accessible to everyone in Canada at no cost. Government has the responsibility to ensure a unified approach to training by funding literacy and health and safety programs to workers' organizations. Government should also pass legislation to protect workers from being dismissed or demoted because of language and communication deficiencies; we wish legislation to require employers not to exclude workers for jobs because of a literacy problem.

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

Lillian Vine

What I heard are some agreements and one quite serious disagreement, which probably only means a point that needs more discussion.

The agreements are that there is a problem with literacy much broader than just in the workplace--in society in general. If this is a societal problem, it means more than solutions from employers, more than solutions from the legislation responsible for occupational health and safety, more than solutions from workers--educational institutions and helping organizations too must be involved. There is a great deal of agreement on coordination--people are concerned about duplication. Another agreement is that appropriate materials must be used for training. You were talking about more than the grade level of material (which is probably too high); you were talking about materials which are appropriate and relevant to specific jobs. And accessibility is a major concern.

One of the issues needing a lot of discussion is labour's concern for protection not only for present employees but also for potential employees. If they do not become employees, that causes problems to society. On the other hand, I heard employers say that they need to determine the qualifications needed for a job and be able to hire to fill those qualifications. I expect that those cannot be resolved without much more discussion. Whether this is an effect of right-to-know laws or not, whether it is really a problem of different ways of looking at an issue which has little to do with the problems of literacy and the right to know, is for you to say.

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Dave McGill - Seneca College

There seems a common theme in all the solutions--that government is going to be the overseeing body of the solutions to this problem. My concern is that the hints we are getting about the budget on April 27 indicate that the government will be cutting back programs significantly. The programs that were built up in the 1960s, the social welfare network, may be ending. Are we picking solutions that in a month we may find out have no validity--that there will be much less government, not more?

Lillian Vine

That is an arresting statement. Are you saying that government has responsibility which may be removed; that you cannot look at government as a body with central responsibility for a workplace problem--workers and employers would have that responsibility to deal with it?

Dave McGill

If government is cutting back funding to education and health services, I do not see things getting better.

Daniel Maurich

When we mentioned government responsibility, we did not necessarily mean funding. There should also be funding from employers and unions; it does not all have to come from one source. But there has to be a unified body to pull everything and everyone together.

Peter Doering

Obviously, labour does look to government for involvement. By spending money on literacy programs, government will be gaining immensely by raising the literacy level of the population in Canada.

Judy Ann Roy

Statistical trends show the working population getting smaller and the education level not necessarily getting higher. We still have high school dropouts and the issue of literacy will always be with us unless we start tackling the problem now and educating our work force.

Jim Ellison - Peel Board of Education

Through the workshops, I found that there was a general consensus among all the representatives as to how we are handling the present work force. Labour thinks that there should be protective legislation. That is the one area of disagreement--the one of recruitment. People representing management and companies which have to show a profit at

the end of the year are reluctant to hire people who are illiterate because of the expense involved. People who work for nonprofit organizations are reluctant too because taxpayer funds are not available to do this job.

Peter Doering

I understand your concern. But when I came to Canada I could speak very little English My employer was willing to take a chance and teach me the trade and the language at the same time. I learned the language within one year through the help of my employer and my co-workers. An illiterate person has a handicap, but in many cases a handicapped person will find ways to compensate--with other skills and talents and diligence and reliability. I believe the employers are losing out by a blanket rejection.

Dorothy Simons - Peel Board of Education

My concern with hiring people who are not able to function at a level to do the basic job is that should that person get hurt or bring harm to others on the job, the company is liable, and this is another cost factor. Considering the safety of the new worker and the safety of present employees is a factor that one must consider when hiring people who are not able to function at a very basic level.

Sandra Glasbeek - Ministry of Labour

Often, when people talk of liability, they look at the US model. In Canada, liability for an injured worker is limited to Workers' Compensation payments. Therefore an injured employee cannot sue the employer for damages.

Another way a company in Canada may be liable for an injury to a worker is through occupational health and safety legislation. That depends on the circumstances. There is not always a prosecution under the Act. Ontario is one of the most vigorous provinces in terms of prosecutions under the Act; but prosecution does not always follow when a worker is injured. Even when there is a prosecution, it is very rare for the courts to award the maximum fine, which is $25,000 in Ontario.

I believe the question of literacy in terms of the impact on the employer and fiscal liability in terms of injury to a worker should not be a major concern in hiring.

Dorothy Simons

Just by way of explanation, one of the concerns of my organization is that if an accident takes place and there is an injury, we are responsible for students and are open for lawsuits from parents. My concern was not with Workers' Compensation.

Robert Loader - Syncrude Canada Ltd

The implications are that you may want to take a chance on employees' health and safety simply because it will not cost an employer very much. I strongly oppose that view. I think the health and welfare of the employees is more important than any subsequent cost.

In addition to that, the costs in lost production and damage to equipment could far outweigh any concerns about increased WCB payments or fines. The real issue here is the employees' health and safety and not the ability or willingness to take a chance.

Sandra Glasbeek

I am not suggesting that, because liability is limited through WCB, employers should take chances. My only suggestion is that this is often brought up as a justification for imposing literacy tests or not hiring workers who lack literacy; it is a red herring. My concern is when this is used as an excuse for discrimination, not to suggest that it should impose a cavalier attitude about the health and safety of workers.

Daniel Maurich

Most of the time when we are talking about hiring standards or requirements, they are not based on literacy; the real measurement would be on-the-job skills that are required to do the job in question. If you are filling a position requiring a high level of mathematical, reading, writing, comprehension and analysis ability, you cannot hire someone who does meet those requirements. It is simply a question of being able to perform a specific job function properly.

Peter Doering

Wherever you go, safety is number one. Two or three years ago, we were finishing a capacity addition project working on the Syncrude Plant, called CAPS, which had the lowest accident frequency rate of the entire industry. We arrived at this by working together, by having constant safety supervision. Safety personnel were easily accessible to the workers. Just because a worker fails a written test does not mean s/he does not have the skills to perform the job safely.

Theresa Holden - Industrial Accident Prevention Association

I have a few thoughts about recruitment and screening. Many people fool themselves into thinking that they have discovered the definitive test to screen candidates; they likely have not. There are many factors to consider when it comes to testing. You may be testing a population who is not used to taking tests because it has been out of school for some time. The person administering the test could be intimidating to the test writer. The test might also have been designed in such a way that it contains cultural biases. If a candidate fails the test, does it mean that s/he does not possess the required skills or does it mean that the test is unreliable or biased? Some tests are not an accurate measurement of a person's abilities.

Using WHMIS material as a screening device to determine if someone is illiterate is not a valid use of these materials. We have to be careful when testing employees and potential employees. There are definite dangers involved. Failure does not mean that the person does not have the skills for the job.

Lillian Vine

I think that, behind your disagreement, you share a deep consciousness of the problems. These are concerns that you have thought about; I doubt that labour is suggesting that you must hire people who cannot meet your job requirements. I think that what was suggested was that someone who can meet your requirements for the job but cannot pass a test, which is perhaps not exactly relevant to the job, maybe should be given a chance; maybe management can find other ways of meeting its requirements to inform its workers. I do not think management is saying it would be unwilling to do that if the person meets the requirements of the job. All of you are conscious of safety in the workplace and are anxious to protect the safety of the people in and surrounding the workplace.

You all agreed that there are problems and that solutions are needed. You all agreed on the need for appropriate and relevant materials, appropriate and relevant training courses, appropriate and relevant testing materials and testing procedures, the importance of information, of accessibility, of coordination. This is a high degree of agreement. If some of you came here yesterday expecting to leave today with all the solutions, you will undoubtedly be disappointed. I do not think many of you will have been. I do not think the solutions are going to be found very quickly.

What seems important that happens at these workshops is that people from different backgrounds, by coming together and discussing the issues in occupational health and safety openly and nonconfrontationally, gain a better understanding of the problems and others' views of them. That there is so much common ground, so much agreement, often surprises the participants. If labour, management, professionals and government people agree that something is right, this is very convincing to those who read and use the proceedings.

I hope you found this an interesting and stimulating experience. I hope you will come back and bring others with you. Twenty percent of the participants at this workshop are repeaters. When my field was education, to say that would have been a dreadful admission of failure. Here it is encouraging evidence of success. I hope that in time you will all become repeaters at CCOHS workshops. It has been a great pleasure for me to work with you.

Jim Ellison

On behalf of everyone here, I would like to thank you Lillian and the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety for holding this workshop. It has been most enjoyable and has provided us with an opportunity to learn and exchange views and to argue, which is healthy. I wish you continued success in what you are doing, which you are doing very well. Thank you very much.

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READER'S NOTES